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‘Now for Our Irish Wars’ – Jez Butterworth’s *The Ferryman* and the Irish dramatic canon

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the Irish features of Jez Butterworth’s *The Ferryman*, focussing on his use of overfamiliar Irish tropes as well as his intertextual allusions to writers such as Brian Friel, WB Yeats, and Seamus Heaney. These links are considered in the context of its first production, in 2017-18, which appeared at a time when the constitutional status of Northern Ireland within the UK was being fiercely debated. The article considers the critical reaction to that production, asking why *The Ferryman* was so frequently described as an ‘Irish’ play. To respond to that question, the article explores the two forms of cultural transmission that are detectable in the play: the influence of Irish drama upon Butterworth’s own practice as a playwright, and the way in which his characters’ actions are over-determined by the repetition of family stories and traditions across several generations. Butterworth’s decision to explore the influence of the Irish dramatic tradition on his own writing demonstrates that there are ways to reach into the past in order to find new ways forward. In the act of writing *The Ferryman*, Butterworth is offering a response to the dilemma that the play itself dramatizes. The political and artistic consequences of that strategy need to be considered, as does the way in which *The Ferryman* builds on themes and tropes present in Butterworth’s earlier plays.

‘Now for Our Irish Wars’ – Jez Butterworth’s *The Ferryman* and the Irish dramatic canon

Is Jez Butterworth’s *The Ferryman* an Irish play? Since its premiere at the Royal Court Theatre in April 2017, it has repeatedly been described as one, mostly without controversy and usually without contradiction – despite the fact that its author is not Irish, has never lived in the country and, before the opening of his play, had not displayed much evidence of an interest in Irish culture.¹ At a public interview in Donegal in August 2018, Butterworth was asked for his own response to that question – and he gave a reply that was unambiguous if mildly facetious. *The Ferryman*, he said, is an Irish play in the way that *Macbeth* is a Scottish play – which is to say that it’s *not* an Irish play at all, but an English one that is very interested in Ireland. His audience laughed as Butterworth apologized for comparing himself to Shakespeare, and the conversation moved on.²

It is perhaps understandable that Butterworth chose not to take that question very seriously. In many other contexts, it has been considered justifiable (if not essential) to consider the risks of appropriation or misrepresentation that can arise when a playwright dramatizes the life of a community that he or she does not belong to – a risk that seems particularly heightened with *The Ferryman*, given both the history of British domination over Ireland and the (not-unrelated) history of negative representations of Irish characters on the British stage.³ Those negative representations appeared across a variety of cultural forms, from cartoons in magazines and newspapers, to films and television programmes, and (of course) also including stage plays – and they were almost always political, aiming to both reflect and shape attitudes towards Ireland and the Irish, whether in the context of the colonization of the island from the sixteenth century onwards, the Troubles period of (roughly) 1969 to 1998, and everything in between.⁴ Butterworth can readily be defended against charges of exploitation; indeed, one

purpose of this article is to define and justify his reasons for writing about the Troubles. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to want to explore his motivations, to analyse the strategies he employs, to evaluate his success, and to consider how his work should be positioned in the cultural contexts outlined above.

My aim in this article is to explore the question of *The Ferryman*'s Irishness in detail, to explain why that question is important, and to understand the conditions that make it necessary to ask it in the first place. It argues that it is important to take Butterworth at his word: *The Ferryman* should indeed be seen as the work of an English dramatist who is attempting to understand and celebrate a culture that is not his own. For that reason, describing the play as 'Irish' is not simply an inaccuracy; it substantially misunderstands what Butterworth is trying to achieve. *The Ferryman*, I will argue, is preoccupied with two forms of cultural transmission: the influence of Irish drama upon Butterworth's own practice as a playwright, and the way in which his characters' actions are over-determined by the repetition of family stories and traditions across several generations. Butterworth shows that the repetition of past events can trap both individuals and nations into damaging cycles of recurrence – something that might explain the persistence of Anglo-Irish conflict across many centuries, just as it can also explain the dysfunctions of an individual or a family. But his decision to explore the influence of the Irish dramatic tradition on his own writing demonstrates that there are ways to reach into the past in order to find new ways forward. In the act of writing *The Ferryman*, Butterworth is opening new ground, and thus is offering a response to the problems of Anglo-Irish history that the play itself dramatizes.

To make this argument, I want to root my analysis in the moment of the play's first production, in London in 2017-18. This is not to ignore or invalidate the importance of other stagings of the play (such as its run in New York in 2018-19⁵) or to dismiss the possibility that newer interpretations of it will become available when it is produced elsewhere. However, the

critical reception of its first production underlines the importance of its exploration of the cultural interplay between Ireland and England – not because that feature of the play was well understood by London critics and audiences but, on the contrary, because it does not seem to have been noticed at all. An exploration of that apparent oversight can be used as a springboard for an analysis of the play’s use of Irish tropes and allusions – which in turn will help to explain the politics of its production and reception.

Plays about the Northern Ireland Troubles have appeared intermittently on the London stage since the early 1970s⁶ – but *The Ferryman* is unusual in being one of a relatively large cluster of high-profile plays on that subject that were produced there between 2016 and 2019. It premiered at the Royal Court Theatre on 24 April 2017, and after a West End transfer it won Olivier Awards for Butterworth, the play’s director Sam Mendes, and the actor Laura Donnelly (who is also Butterworth’s partner and whose family background partially inspired the play⁷). It had followed another drama about Northern Ireland on the Royal Court stage: David Ireland’s *Cyprus Avenue*, which appeared there in 2016 and was revived in 2019 (Ireland also premiered *Everything Between Us* at the Finborough in May 2017, its run coinciding with *The Ferryman*’s opening weeks). In 2018, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, Martin McDonagh’s satire about Irish republican terrorism, was revived by Michael Grandage’s company for a summer season, opening at the Noel Coward theatre shortly after *The Ferryman* had concluded its own West End run at the nearby Gielgud. And during that same summer, the National Theatre revived Brian Friel’s *Translations* (1980) – which, though set in the 1830s, was written in response to the Troubles.⁸ There was also evidence of new interest in Northern Ireland in other media: the TV show *Derry Girls* premiered on Channel 4 in the summer of 2018, while Anna Burns’ Belfast-based novel *Milkman* won the Booker Prize in the same year.

It is beyond the scope of this article to consider how and why this sudden intensification of interest in Northern Ireland arose, though of course all of these works have in common the fact that they spoke to concerns about the place of Northern Ireland in the UK at a time when that topic was being fervently (and sometimes fervidly) debated in the context of the UK's Brexit negotiations with the EU.⁹ It is necessary to assert, however, that although the referendum result might explain the *reception* of the works mentioned above, it cannot necessarily account for their composition or the decisions made by theatres about when and where to produce them. Butterworth was inspired to write *The Ferryman* in 2013, long before Brexit – and, when it was produced by the Royal Court in association with Sonia Friedman, its marketing made no attempt to suggest that it had contemporary political relevance or topicality.¹⁰

But there is of course one obvious characteristic that differentiates *The Ferryman* from the examples given above. David Ireland, Friel, Burns and Lisa McGee (the writer of *Derry Girls*) were born in Northern Ireland – and although McDonagh is a Londoner, he has generally (if not uncontroversially) been seen as an Irish playwright.¹¹ Butterworth also has connections with Ireland, albeit that they are less immediate than McDonagh's (in several interviews, Butterworth's parents are described as 'part Irish Catholic', implying that he must be at least two generations removed from the country¹²). But Butterworth's reputation as a playwright has been built upon his investigation of the culture, language and landscapes of England. That preoccupation has been evident in most of his plays to date, from his dramatization of the gang-based culture of 1950s Soho in *Mojo* (1999) to the various English settings of *The Night Heron* (2002), *The Winterling* (2006), *Parlour Song* (2008) and *Jerusalem* (2009). This consistency of perspective explains Michael Billington's observation that Butterworth is 'haunted by the nature of Englishness: he constantly asks how we preserve ancestral memories and countryside rituals in an age of ribbon development and hi-tech advance'.¹³ His 2012 play *The River*

indicated a willingness to depart from the specificity of setting in his earlier work: the play happens in England but its precise location is difficult to pinpoint on a map and is not directly relevant to the plot or themes. However, as Anna Harpin points out, even if his plays ask ‘what on earth national identity might mean any more’ they continue to do so with an ‘exacting and exclusive focus on England’.¹⁴ For that reason, before 2017 it might have seemed inaccurate to describe Butterworth even as a British playwright, so intense was his focus on Englishness. *The Ferryman* thus represents a departure from what came before, geographically if in no other respect.

Yet the first London reviews of *The Ferryman* tended not to consider the possibility that the shift to an Irish setting might require anything more than passing notice. Veronica Thorpe in *The Observer* was one of many reviewers who called *The Ferryman* a ‘masterpiece’, but more contentious is her assertion that the play ‘joins the canon of Irish drama, from Seán O’Casey’s *The Shadow of a Gunman*, through Brendan Behan, to the work of Martin McDonagh, Enda Walsh and Conor McPherson’.¹⁵ Other journalists made similar remarks. Reviewing the London premiere for the *New York Times*, Ben Brantley called it ‘Butterworth’s contribution to the literature of the conflict known as the Troubles,’ and he too compared it to O’Casey’s plays.¹⁶ More confusingly, Susannah Clapp in *The Observer* expressed negativity about the presentation of the play’s only English character, Tom Kettle: ‘Perhaps that is what the Irish think of the English,’ she mused – a hypothesis that was probably being made half-jokingly but which nevertheless suggests that the national origins of the play had temporarily slipped her mind, given that neither its author, the director nor the actor playing the role is Irish.¹⁷

An exception to this approach was a nuanced response by the *Guardian* columnist Sean O’Hagan, who expressed his discomfort with *The Ferryman*’s lack of authenticity: ‘I am not... disputing Butterworth’s right to write a play about Ireland and the Troubles,’ he concluded,

‘but I could not help thinking that this was the sound of a mainly middle-class English audience having their cultural stereotypes confirmed rather than questioned.’¹⁸ As already noted, the fact that debates about cultural appropriation were particularly heated in London at the time of the play’s premiere makes it all the more surprising that Butterworth’s entitlement to write a play about the Troubles was generally taken for granted, O’Hagan’s critique aside. That assumption of entitlement seems neither conscious nor founded on anti-Irish prejudice; if anything, it provides evidence of the importance of English theatres to the careers and reputations of Irish writers such as David Ireland, Conor McPherson and Martin McDonagh. But the assumption is consistently apparent.

Its prevalence is somewhat understandable: there is a long history of ‘Irish plays’ being written by non-Irish authors. In British contexts one might think of such productions as Rebecca Linkiewicz’s *The Night Season* (2004) or Tanya Ronder’s adaptation of Pirandello’s *Liola* (2013), both performed at the National Theatre in London, and both set in Ireland due to a perceived need to make the dialogue seem more poetic than was considered possible in an English setting.¹⁹ And on Broadway there have always been ‘Irish’ plays that display little interest in the real country – from hit musicals such as *Irene* (1919) and *Abie’s Irish Rose* (1922) a century ago to John Patrick Shanley’s play *Outside Mullingar* in 2014. But, notwithstanding the formal and thematic diversity of such works, few of them ever make claims for the authenticity of their setting; they rarely display evidence of political knowledge or attempt to deepen audiences’ political awareness.

And of course, Butterworth is not the first English dramatist to address the Troubles on stage. Some writers have done so directly, as in *England’s Ireland*, co-written in 1972 by David Hare, Tony Bicât, Howard Brenton, Brian Clark, David Edgar, Francis Fuchs, and Snoo Wilson. Others have written about it indirectly as in Brenton’s *Romans in Britain* (1980) and David Rudkin’s *The Saxon Shore* (1986). And some have done so as part of a broader analysis

of British history, as in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979). Most have done so controversially: it was intended that *England's Ireland* would tour widely through the UK, for example, but many theatres refused to take it, a decision that Hare would later describe as an act of censorship.²⁰ But insofar as such plays address the politics of the Troubles, they do so as a critique of British society more generally.

Yet in both of the above contexts, *The Ferryman* seems anomalous. By claiming to have been based on real events, and by including multiple references to real people and real political events, the play appears to lay claim to the kind of detailed knowledge of Ireland that is found in work by such writers as McPherson, Behan and O'Casey – but (unlike works such as *Cloud Nine*) it has little to say about Britain itself. A further difficulty is that (as outlined below) many of its allusions to Ireland are either superficial or inaccurate. This again gives rise to questions about appropriation and the entitlement to speak on behalf of communities other than one's own.

Perhaps what is most evident here is an imprecision in the use of the word 'Irish': although the term 'Irish drama' *should* primarily refer to the fact that a play's author is from Ireland, it is sometimes used instead to denote something not unlike a genre – a form of writing that is recognisable because of its adherence to a set of pre-existing conventions, and which can therefore be written by anyone. In this respect, Butterworth's relative lack of knowledge of Irish drama is, perhaps ironically, one of the reasons why *The Ferryman* was misunderstood as an 'Irish play': as this article explains, he makes use of so many of the stock features of Irish plays and films that the identification of *The Ferryman* as Irish was made not on the basis of nationality but in terms of generic correspondences. This suggestion gives rise to a question – what elements of the play caused it to be seen as Irish?

Time and the Carneys

In an early scene in *The Ferryman*, one of the characters complains that her brother's story about their shared childhood is excessively boring. 'There's absolutely no point to it,' says the woman, whose name is Pat. '*Nothing happens*. No one gets drunk. No one feels up no one they shouldn't. No one falls into the grain silo and drowns. There's not even a good punch-up'.²¹

It is probably not a coincidence that this formula for good storytelling can readily be mapped on to the plot of *The Ferryman* itself. Many of Butterworth's 22 characters *do* get drunk: most of the characters consume whiskey at least once during the play – including six of the children who appear in it, the exception being a nine-month old baby (one must draw the line somewhere, after all). At its centre is an unconsummated romance between the family patriarch Quinn Carney and his sister-in-law Caitlin. It would be inaccurate to suggest that either of these characters 'feels up [someone] they shouldn't', but certainly their feelings for each other would, if discovered, be condemned by their family and wider community – firstly because Quinn is married to someone else and, more seriously, because Caitlin's husband Seamus (who is also Quinn's brother) is one of the 'Disappeared', a term used to describe the sixteen (or more) people who, from the 1970s onwards, were abducted by the IRA, murdered, and buried in unmarked graves.²² As happened with the real Disappeared, Seamus's fate has become a subject of gossip, rumour and speculation, much of it malicious – so the Carneys have had to live for almost a decade with uncertainty about whether he is really dead. It is the discovery of his body that sets the events of the play in motion.

Other similarities with Aunt Pat's rules for good storytelling can be identified. Shortly before the play's conclusion, there *is* a death due to a tragic accident – not a drowning in a grain silo but the murder in self-defence of Caitlin's son Oisín by Tom Kettle. And there is much more than a 'punch-up' at the end: Quinn shoots Muldoon, the IRA commander responsible for 'disappearing' his brother, and two of his henchmen. That act of violence seems likely to lead to the retaliatory murder of Quinn (and possibly other members of his family),

an outcome suggested not only by Butterworth's repeated use of an unanswered question – 'what will we do?' – in the play's final seconds, but also by the accompaniment of those words with the screams of banshees (pp. 134-5), which are a harbinger of death in Irish folklore.

The resemblance between Aunt Pat's rules for storytelling and the play's plot demonstrates that *The Ferryman* is following a well-worn formula – one that is so readily identifiable that its component elements can, in Aunt Pat's telling, seem like clichés (albeit that she values stories precisely *because* they repeat the formulae). For that reason, it might seem justifiable that the play draws enthusiastically on stock elements of the many Irish plays and melodramas that have populated British and American stages (and cinema screens) for centuries. One of the first stage Irish characters in English drama was Shakespeare's Macmorris in *Henry V*, a character often portrayed as a boozy and aggressive malcontent whose key line – 'what ish my nation' – seems as relevant to the status of Northern Ireland in a post-Brexit UK in 2017 as it is for the Carneys in 1981, and as it was for Shakespeare in 1599.²³ But many other familiar motifs and stereotypes are employed. The characterization of Father Horrigan draws on the trope of the Catholic priest who is forced to defy the sanctity of the confessional – a figure perhaps best known from Hitchcock's *I Confess!* (1951) but present in numerous other examples. The presentation in the Mendes production of the IRA commander Muldoon as a leather-jacket-clad gangster resembles several Hollywood precursors – such as those seen in the Brad Pitt and Harrison Ford vehicle *The Devil's Own* (1997), the 1992 thriller *The Patriot Games* (also starring Ford), and the 1987 Mickey Rourke thriller *A Prayer for the Dying* – a movie which, incidentally, also features a 'seal of the confessional' subplot. And while the banshee exists in Irish folklore as a mournful female spirit who acts as a herald of death, its presentation as the ghost-like and deliberately frightening figure in the play has its origins not in Irish culture but in the 1959 Disney film *Darby O'Gill and the Little People*.²⁴

But perhaps the most significant similarity with what has come before is that Butterworth uses the theme of repetition as a way of dramatizing the Troubles, showing how his characters have become trapped in apparently inescapable cycles of violence and self-destruction that go back several generations. That theme has dominated modern Irish drama – which means that Butterworth’s focus on the theme of repetition is itself an act of repetition. It is present in the play that W.B. Yeats claimed had inspired the 1916 Easter Rising against British rule, *Kathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) – a short work co-written with Lady Gregory that envisions Irish rebellion as transcending military defeat because it will be celebrated eternally through poetry and song.²⁵ O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) also explores the theme of eternally-recurring blood sacrifice, presenting a sequence of deaths that collectively suggest that by fighting for Ireland’s freedom its young men are depriving the country of a secure future – a dramaturgical approach that reacted against the politics of *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, even as it borrowed and rewrote the theme of recurrence. Repetition has also been a strong preoccupation of Irish dramatists who were less concerned with politics, perhaps most obviously in the case of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1955), a play in which nothing happens, over and over again.²⁶

In a similar fashion, Butterworth seems interested in exploring how the repetition of traditions, patterns, symbols and stories both defines and delimits his characters’ lives. In common with many Irish dramatists (notably Brian Friel, as discussed below), Butterworth grounds his investigation of cyclical repetition by setting his play at harvest-time. Here the words of Aunt Pat’s brother (who, somewhat confusingly, is also called Pat) are helpful, revealing that the act of honouring harvest-time traditions is itself a tradition that must be honoured:

In 494 BC, Darius the Great stopped the Persian War to give the Greeks time to harvest their grapes. Because even a war-thirsty blood-monger like Darius knew, the harvest is

sacred [...] I shall close with the words of Henry Thoreau. 'The true Harvest of my Life is intangible. A little stardust caught. A portion of the rainbow I have clutched.' (p. 71)

These allusions – the first to Herodotus and the second to *Walden* – locate the Carneys within history (drawing a parallel between the Graeco-Persian wars and the Troubles) and within world literature.²⁷ But they also show how harvest-time has become codified by social practices and family tradition – such that any deviation from what ‘always’ happens can be seen as a potential ‘calamity’ (p. 32). There must, says Pat, always be a ‘Harvest Breakfast, and a kite on the go, and a goose ... and the men and the boys will be working night and day, and when it's over there's going to be a marvellous feast’ (p. 36). Speaking with a deliberate irony (and delivering a line that is later revealed to be a carefully-seeded moment of dramatic irony within the play itself), Quinn expresses fear of the consequences that will befall his family due to the escape of the harvest goose. A ‘desperate situation has befallen us,’ he states. ‘Now I don't have to tell you what a disaster this is.’ (pp. 34-5). Of course he is joking – but a disaster is exactly what awaits his family nevertheless.

As with any family tradition, the status of the harvest can be used to define actions in both literal and symbolical contexts. For Quinn’s son Michael, the time of year can be used to justify his bullying behaviour towards his cousin Oisín: ‘Jesus Christ, it was just a bit of fun... We always have a bit of a roar. It's tradition’ (p. 40). It is also significant that when Muldoon arrives in the Carneys’ farmhouse, his first questions relate to the harvest; he displays an interest in Quinn’s crops, thus implicitly emphasising the insecurity of the family’s livelihood (p. 80). As the confrontation between the two men intensifies, Muldoon attempts to degrade Quinn by reminding him that ‘You're not a soldier any more. You're a farmer’ (p. 84). Acting as another implicit threat, Muldoon’s statement also marks a rupture from the tradition

identified in Herodotus, whereby a man could be both a soldier *and* a farmer – and in which the responsibilities associated with the latter could trump the duties of the former.

The breaking of harvest traditions thus becomes loaded with symbolic weight. The goose is eventually retrieved, killed and consumed – but the harvest kite never gets off the ground, its destruction in the first act foreshadowing the death of Oisín at the play's finale. When Caitlin learns of the discovery of her husband's body, she insists that 'We don't tell anyone. The harvest comes and goes, and tomorrow... Tomorrow we'll tell them' (p. 54). She explains that decision in relation to the importance of maintaining traditions: 'I'm not having those bastards wreck ten years and a fuckin' party' (p. 54). But the revelation of Seamus's death is made against her wishes, and spurs on much of the violence that follows. Later, Quinn's wife Mary shows a similar awareness of the significance of tradition by insisting that she – and not Caitlin – will take responsibility for making the Harvest Breakfast for the first time in many years (p. 124), signalling her awareness of Quinn and Caitlin's love for each other, and asserting a determination to obstruct it.

The theme of recurrence is explored in other significant ways. David Ian Rabey has written about Butterworth's 'skill in incorporating and developing "depth charges": theatrical details, which are established early in the play, casually or comically, but are then returned to, with startling repercussions'.²⁸ One of those 'depth charges' in *The Ferryman* is a wristwatch, an object that both marks time and which symbolizes the recirculation of objects *through* time. Seamus's remains are identified because of the presence on his body of a Timex watch (p. 10), an object that reveals its owner's enjoyment of flashily materialistic things (later alluded to by Caitlin when she speaks of Seamus's love of his car) – but which also underlines how the discovery of his body is worrisome to the IRA because they find themselves in what Muldoon describes as a 'critical time': the fact that republican movement had gained worldwide attention due to the Hunger Strikes that had begun in Belfast's Maze prison in 1980 – a sequence of

events whereby ten IRA prisoners starved themselves to death, symbolically locating themselves in the long tradition of Irish political martyrdom that Yeats and Gregory's *Kathleen ni Houlihan* had encapsulated. 'That's why it's crucial, moving forward, that when the news concerning Seamus is realized, that no wrongful allegations be made which might damage our efforts, or jeopardize our goals,' Muldoon warns (p. 84).

Muldoon is linked to a second wristwatch and it too has symbolic as well as functional significance. Shane boasts to his cousins that he was given a gift of a watch by Muldoon – but this was no act of generosity: Muldoon wanted Shane to monitor and record the movements of a laundry van that was later attacked by the IRA. Shane's possession of the watch makes him an accessory to murder – but it also weakens any familial loyalty that he might feel towards Quinn, something that contributes to the tragic circumstances that conclude the play.

Another example of a 'depth charge' is the telling of stories by another aunt, called Maggie, who emerges from senility into moments of occasional lucidity. The longest of these comes in the second act, when she starts telling a story about the Irish fairies. 'I love this one,' says Nunu, one of the youngest Carney children: 'it's so violent!' – a note of approval that offers further insight into both the Carneys' and Butterworth's attitudes to good storytelling (p. 59). That story soon merges into two others, the first about Aunt Maggie's unrequited love for a man, and the second outlining Aunt Pat's attempts to join her brother Michael during the Easter Rising.

There is a strong parallel between Aunt Maggie's tale of undeclared love and the relationship between Quinn and Caitlin, a link that implies that this is a family doomed to repeat its mistakes. And the story about Aunt Pat and the Easter Rising similarly gestures backwards (in telling us something about the family's past) and forwards (in revealing the future that is imminently to befall the Carneys). Maggie recalls how in 1916 Aunt Pat stood in a field outside their house, holding the pistol that had belonged to their brother Michael: 'Except she wasn't

alone. There were others in the field with her. They were the *Banshees*. Ten thousand ... And they were all screaming. Screaming in unison. Screaming and pointing at the sky' (p. 63-4). The play concludes with the return of those banshees, creating a link between Irish folklore and Irish politics that suggests a pattern not of linear progress towards peace, but of eternally recurring acts of bloodshed and tragedy.

That sense of Irish politics involving repetition rather than teleological progress is signalled during the harvest meal, when Aunt Pat tells her family that another member of the IRA has died: 'Michael Devine has starved himself to death' she reveals (p. 77), before naming in incantatory fashion the other nine men who (at that moment in time) had died during the Hunger Strikes, finishing with Bobby Sands – a figure alluded to several times in the play and who also gives his name to the youngest of the Carneys' children (yet another indication of how Irish politics seems to generate cycles of recurrence, the dead patriot giving his name to a new-born child, just as the Michael Carney who died in 1916 gave his name to another of Quinn's sons). The incantation of the names of the Hunger Strikers is followed by a similar act of repeating names, when some of the younger characters sing the Wolf Tones song 'Erin go Bragh':

God Bless gallant Pearse and his comrades who died
Tom Clark, MacDonagh, MacDiarmad, McBryde
And here's to James Connolly who gave one Hurrah!
And faced the machine guns for Erin Go Bragh (p. 77)

Those men were the signatories of the 1916 Rising, all of whom were executed by the British authorities after their surrender. So just as Aunt Maggie's story of the Easter Rising is mirrored by the fate of the Carney family, so is the fate of the leaders of the Easter Rising repeated in

the deaths of the IRA Hunger Strikers. The situation of the individual family thus operates in a synecdochal relationship with Irish history generally: the Carneys find themselves in cycles that are in some cases positive (such as the natural cycles of harvesting food) and in others are self-destructive (such as the recurrent ‘martyrdom’ of Republican leaders) – but which in both cases seem difficult if not impossible to break.

Many plays about the Troubles focus on precisely the conundrum explored in *The Ferryman* – how to act respectfully towards important elements of the past (such as family traditions) while embracing the kinds of change that are necessary if peace is to be achieved. That dilemma can be found in countless plays, among them Christina Reid’s exploration of a working class protestant community in Belfast in *Tea in a China Cup* (1983); Frank McGuinness’s consideration of the legacies of the First World War in *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985); and Owen McCafferty’s *Quietly* (2012), a play that asks whether peace has brought reconciliation.²⁹ Given the dominance of that theme across several decades, it makes sense that a critic such as Ben Brantley might see *The Ferryman* as a contribution to the literature of the Troubles.

But before locating the play firmly in that tradition, it is important to recollect that most of Butterworth’s plays are interested in the theme of cyclical repetition. Many of them place particular significance in the seasons, such as the winter-time settings of *The Winterling* and *The Night Heron*; and *Jerusalem* and *Parlour Song* in different ways explore the extent to which rural English traditions can be preserved in a society that is becoming more urban, more homogeneous. This context is important for understanding *The Ferryman*. One might be tempted to view the rural setting of the play and its use of the (pre-modern) harvest-time trope as evidence of a desire to situate Ireland as England’s opposite (and as its inferior), which, as Declan Kiberd points out, is one of the dominant traits in British writing about Ireland: ‘Through many centuries, Ireland was pressed into service as a foil to set off English virtues,

as a laboratory in which to conduct experiments, and as a fantasy-land in which to meet fairies and monsters'.³⁰ But those features of the play must instead be seen as operating in continuity with (and not in opposition to) Butterworth's presentation of Englishness: in his oeuvre, the countries' similarities become more easily identifiable than their differences. Furthermore, as Rabey has noted, although Butterworth's approach to tragedy might owe something to the gothic horrors of Conor McPherson (and to Greek tragedy), it is significantly more influenced by such English precursors as John Osborne and Edward Bond.³¹ For all of these reasons, *The Ferryman* is in its own right an act of repetition – not just of an Irish tradition, but of themes and techniques that run throughout Butterworth's dramas. To view the play as Irish thus risks obscuring how it builds on what has come before – and that in turn gives rise to a question about how to explain *The Ferryman*'s resemblance to other Troubles plays: is it a coincidence, a deliberate homage, a superficial resemblance, or something else? Just how much does Butterworth know about Irish drama?

Butterworth and the 'Canon of Irish Drama'

Many of the details about Irish life and culture included in *The Ferryman* are perceptive and accurate, but any audience-member with detailed knowledge of the country will be able to identify inauthenticities that are minor in themselves but which collectively might be rather unsettling. The tradition of the 'harvest goose' does exist in Ireland, but it largely died out at the beginning of the twentieth century, and always happened not in mid-August but at Michaelmas (late September). The Irish legend of the banshee has become confused with its manifestations in popular culture even within Ireland itself, but many Irish audience-members would still be aware that the banshee was always a solitary figure who, if not necessarily benign, was unlikely to be frightening – rendering the play's final image of thousands of screaming ghosts distractingly sensationalistic. Other small details seem similarly inaccurate.

It tells us much about Quinn's character that he would choose, after the disappearance of his brother, to name two of his children Mercy and Honour – but it seems unlikely that Catholic family in Armagh in the 1980s would have given their children such names. A character from Derry would have been very unlikely to use the word 'shall'.³² And no Irish republican would ever have called Margaret Thatcher 'our' prime minister, even sarcastically, as Aunt Pat does during the play's second act (p. 41). Butterworth might argue – as Brian Friel did in relation to *Translations* – that a playwright has no responsibility to be historically accurate, given that most plays are self-evident works of fiction.³³ And it might also be conceded the inaccuracies above are inconsequential, that they are unlikely have an impact on the political outlook of any audience members. But they do call into question the depth of Butterworth's knowledge of his subject: to fictionalize a country is one thing, but to make mistakes about its presentation is another.

Yet if such details are likely to jar with some of the audience, many of the other references to Irish drama and literature are deployed with cultural sensitivity and dramaturgical purpose. Perhaps the most important is that the play repeatedly pays homage to the work of Brian Friel – a person who was unmentioned in the London reviews of *The Ferryman* but who was, Butterworth claimed, responsible for his decision to begin writing plays.³⁴ There are many echoes of Friel's *Translations* in *The Ferryman*: Uncle Pat's quotations from Virgil give Butterworth's play its title (which is an allusion to Book VI of the *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas crosses the River Styx to visit Hades), but also link Pat to the Virgil-quoting Jimmy Jack in Friel's play. The recitation of the names of the Hunger Strikers and the leaders of the Easter Rising referred to above creates a moment of incantatory power that resembles the end of *Jerusalem* but which in both cases appear to be inspired by key passages from Friel's *Faith Healer* (1979), which Butterworth has said is his favourite of Friel's plays.³⁵ And, most prominently, *The Ferryman* closely tracks several of the most important features of *Dancing*

at *Lughnasa* (1990). Both plays are set at harvest time; from context, it is apparent that *The Ferryman* happens on 20 August 1981,³⁶ while *Lughnasa* is set in August 1936 – which means that both use the metaphor of harvest to create a sense of loss in the audience, giving us the final moments of joy before a family is destroyed. There is a kite that never flies in both plays, operating as a symbol of loss in similar ways. Both plays involve interruptions from a radio, Friel's bringing news of Mussolini and Butterworth's of Margaret Thatcher – and in both dramas acting as a symbol of modernity that sits uneasily against the ostensibly pre-modern harvest-time setting. Both feature a bird whose death, in Chekhovian fashion, is weighted with symbolic dread. Friel uses a song by Cole Porter to demonstrate that his characters are connected to the most current forms of popular culture of their day; *The Ferryman*'s references to David Bowie and the Undertones achieve much the same objective.

And perhaps most noticeably, both plays feature a dance scene that is both a moment of euphoric release and an expression of the private distress of one of the major female characters, Aunt Kate in *Lughnasa* and the similarly-named Caitlin in *The Ferryman*. That there is a dance scene in *The Ferryman* will surprise no-one who is familiar with Irish drama (though, to be fair, it will also surprise no-one who has seen *Jerusalem*³⁷). The dance scene in *Lughnasa* partly inspired *Riverdance* (1994), and the latter so popularized Irish dance internationally that it appeared in everything from *The Simpsons* to the film *Titanic* (1997) – ultimately being parodied as a cliché in Marie Jones's *Stones in His Pockets* (1999).³⁸

There are many other similarities to Irish plays, though most seem minor or coincidental. As discussed above – and as noted by many of the London critics – the resemblances to the tragedies of O'Casey and Behan are strong, and its supernatural elements may remind audiences of the plays of Conor McPherson, whose *Shining City* (2003) also concludes with the appearance of a ghostly female figure. Butterworth's attempt to tie the tragic form to an Irish country kitchen recalls such plays of J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1904),

John B Keane's *Sive* (1959) and Marina Carr's *Portia Coughlan* (1996), among countless others (and again it is important to note that those plays, like *The Ferryman*, also draw on elements of Greek tragedy). There are apparent resemblances to Beckett too: its bickering male and female Pats are reminiscent of Nag and Nell in *Endgame* (1957); and when one of the characters in *The Ferryman* begins to tell a joke, audiences familiar with *Waiting for Godot* might justly suspect that its punchline will never arrive: 'You don't cut a man off when he's mid-joke,' complains the character. 'It's practically illegal' (p. 41).³⁹ Well – not if you're a character in an Irish play.

One particularly strong resemblance is to the work of Tom Murphy. Murphy also wrote an Irish tragedy about a family called the Carneys: *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961) – a play created by an Irish dramatist but set in England, rather like *The Ferryman* is written by an English dramatist but set in Ireland. Both sets of Carney families have a son called Michael, whose attempts to act as a peace-maker against the taunting ridicule of his more aggressive male relatives ultimately prove futile; both plays conclude with the unexpected death of one of the youngest family members, and the unmasking of the family patriarch's inadequacies. Also very reminiscent of one of Murphy's characters is Aunt Maggie Faraway, who strongly resembles Murphy's Mommo from *Bailegangaire* (1985), another female storyteller whose dementia operates metaphorically within the play. However, at the public talk in Donegal in 2018, Butterworth stated that he has neither seen nor read any of Murphy's plays. That revelation is very telling.

These examples show that Butterworth's allusions to Irish drama range from the well-informed (the references to *Translations*) to the coincidental (as in the overlap with *A Whistle in the Dark*) to the recirculation of images and tropes that are likely to be seen as clichéd (the dance scene, the banshees). Collectively, they demonstrate that Butterworth has a good

knowledge of Friel but also that, with the exception of some of the better known tropes and stereotypes, his general awareness of Irish drama is neither wide nor deep.

Something similar can be said about the play's many uses of poetry, which again range from the substantial to the superficial. The play's prologue, for example, includes a reference to the Tollund Man (p. 9), a mummified corpse of a man who was murdered violently at least 6,000 years ago, and whose body was found in a Danish bog in the 1950s. In drawing a relationship between that figure and the dead of the Northern Ireland Troubles, Butterworth is following Seamus Heaney, whose 'bog poems' – including the 1972 'Tollund Man' – drew the same connection. For Heaney, the Tollund Man figure was used to suggest that the cycles of violence in Northern Ireland are not unique (because other societies have experienced violent conflict) – but also that cycles of violence are not unbreakable (because other conflicts have concluded).⁴⁰ Butterworth's allusion to this figure makes a similar point, albeit that Heaney was careful to situate himself ethically, as both poet and citizen, in relation to the violence he was depicting.

There are also references to W.B. Yeats, whose 'The Stolen Child' is recited in the first act (p. 37) – and who is, incidentally, also quoted at length in *The River*.⁴¹ That poem dramatizes the Irish legend of the changeling, the 'stolen child' of its title being an infant who is taken to the land of eternal youth by the fairies. As well as anticipating the death of Caitlin's son (another 'stolen child', whose name – Oisín – recalls an Irish legend about Tír na nÓg, the land of eternal youth), Butterworth's use of this poem creates a continuum between the mythical past and the political present. The world 'more full of weeping than you can understand' in the poem is Yeats's vividly described idealization of the Irish landscape but, as recited in the play, is also a representation of the world of dying Hunger Strikers, of ongoing violence, and political uncertainty.

But perhaps one of the most interesting allusions is to a very obscure poem called ‘A Dream’ by William Allingham (1824-1889). Originally published in the 1850s, the poem was reprinted by Yeats in his *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*.⁴² Aunt Maggie sings Allingham’s first verse:

I heard the dogs howl in the moonlight night;

I went to the window to see the sight;

All the Dead that I ever knew

Going one by one and two by two.⁴³

The language here is certainly evocative, with the references to the dead passing by in the moonlight foreshadowing the play’s conclusion, while also reminding the audience of how the Carneys are ‘haunted’ by the deaths of others: the victims of the Hunger Strikes, certainly – but also members of their own family, including Seamus, of course. It is very unlikely that Butterworth intends his audience to draw a link between Allingham and *The Ferryman*: the poem is too obscure – and the action of the play too fast-moving – for such connections to inform his audiences’ responses. He may not even have read beyond the poem’s first verse himself (the rest of it contains a strange blend of necrophiliac and incestuous desire that, to a contemporary audience, would seem like a Freudian nightmare). But what matters is that the poem and play share similar approaches to language and symbolism, and that the cultural assumptions informing one appear to be valid for the other.

That Butterworth has thought carefully about such intertextual references is evident from the one English poem that he includes: Tom Kettle recites ‘The Silent Lover’ by Walter Raleigh during the harvest feast, using it to reveal hitherto hidden feelings for Caitlin (p. 74-5). Tom’s choice of Raleigh can be explained by the fact that he was brought up in England:

the poem is part of his national literature, and while it is neither as famous as ‘The Stolen Child’ nor as obscure as Allingham’s ‘A Dream’, it is not altogether incredible that Kettle would know such a poem by heart.

But his choice is significant in another way. Walter Raleigh was directly involved in the Elizabethan colonization of Ireland, and thus is part of the long history of Anglo-Irish conflict that the play is commenting upon. Raleigh violently put down rebellions in Ireland between 1579 and 1583, and for doing so was rewarded with thousands of acres of land in the southern Irish province of Munster. Butterworth’s choice of a poem by Raleigh places literature in a state of tension with history (as *The Ferryman* itself does): the beauty of the poem stands in contrast with the actions of its author. It also reveals the uncertain status of Kettle within both the Carney household and the play itself. He is treated as one of the family but is also frequently subjected to anti-English bigotry; he is an almost otherworldly figure, producing live rabbits from his coat as if by magic (p. 29) – but later becomes responsible for one of the play’s most consequential events, the death of Oisín. As an emblem of England’s presence in Ireland, both Kettle and Raleigh embody a terrible tension between the benign and the destructive.

Again following the example of Friel, whose characters were as likely to dance to Cole Porter as a traditional Irish jig, Butterworth places his Irish allusions into a broader cultural context. The characters do not just quote Yeats and Allingham; they make jokes about Adam Ant and the Human League. And if Yeats’s ‘Stolen Child’ is used to foreshadow the play’s conclusion, so too are the lyrics of David Bowie’s ‘Ashes to Ashes’ (p. 20), a song that is about addiction but which also explores (just as the play does) how people can become trapped in self-perpetuating cycles of self-harm. We also learn that, in common with many Irish patriots, the Carneys are fans of Glasgow Celtic and Manchester United, two football clubs that have Irish connections but which, of course, are located in Scotland and England respectively.

One effect of such allusions is to break down the barriers between the Irish characters in 1981 and the London audiences of 2017-18. A West End theatre-goer might not have much knowledge of Northern Ireland, but could have a strong opinion about Manchester United; they may not be familiar with Yeats but they could be fans of Bowie. Indeed, one of the first jokes in the play relies on audiences' knowledge of the differences between the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin, the last of whom are criticized for writing songs about hobbits (p. 16) – and if that reference to the 1971 song 'Misty Mountain Hop' gets a laugh, then it demonstrates how the Irish characters who make the joke and the London audiences who laugh at it share a similar cultural frame of reference, something that might disrupt any 'us and them' dynamic that might be created by the play's setting.

There is also an attempt to show that culture involves the repetition of underlying patterns. Thus, a rebel song by the Dubliners can co-exist with 'the Kids in America' and 'Street Fighting Man', while the impromptu ceilidh dance mentioned above gives way to the song 'Teenage Kicks', with the dancing changing accordingly. That shift – from the Wolfe Tones to the Undertones, if you will – suggests that tradition and modernity can co-exist quite happily. But it also demonstrates that the distance between London and Armagh – and the gap between 1981 and 2017 – might not be so wide.

How then to describe Butterworth's use of Irish references? Literary allusion has always been one of his most important techniques – so we find references to Ted Hughes, Virginia Woolf, Yeats, and TS Elliot in *The River*; while Shakespeare, Blake and (of course) Byron are important presences in *Jerusalem*.⁴⁴ Some of those allusions are used to build mood within the drama (as happens in *The River* when Hughes's 'After Moonless Midnight' is recited in its entirety), and others to develop character (as when the Yeats poem 'the Song of Wandering Aengus' reveals the mindset of 'the Man' in the same play).⁴⁵ But collectively these allusions involve an exploration of how literature, theatre and other cultural forms assist

in the construction of identities – at individual, communal and national levels. *The Ferryman* must be seen in this context.

Conclusion: the ‘Treasures of Yore’

When Aunt Pat attacks her brother’s storytelling skills at the beginning of *The Ferryman*, he offers a firm riposte. Storytelling, he states, helps to draw their family closer together: ‘This is what being a family entails,’ he contends: ‘the old ones passing on the “Treasures of Yore” to the wee ‘uns. What else is the point is us still being here if not for that? It’s what family does, for Chrissakes!’ (pp. 32-3).

If, as Uncle Pat contends, a family is held together by the stories that it passes down, then the same is true of a nation. *The Ferryman* shows that the Carneys have in some ways been trapped by the stories of Irish rebellion, with 1916 and 1981 operating interchangeably, the loss of Michael Carney at the beginning of the century foreshadowing the death of Seamus Carney decades later. But their family unit is also constituted and strengthened by the handing down of traditions: their harvest meal is obviously an occasion of joy, and the stories that the older generation tell the younger are expressions not only of identity but of love.

And what is true for the Carneys is also true for England: if that nation keeps telling itself the same stories, it risks being trapped in cycles of self-destruction or stasis. And, as mentioned above, this exploration of the cycles of English life has been one of Butterworth’s most important themes. By choosing to write a play about Ireland, Butterworth is – like Christina Reid, Frank McGuinness and Brian Friel – asking the question of how to remain faithful to past traditions (including his own thematic preoccupations). But he is also doing something new: writing about a culture that is adjacent to but different from his own. Far from being an act of appropriation, this must be seen as an act of renewal, one that comes from a position of curiosity, generosity and respect.

Also significant is the way in which his play navigates the distance between past and present, bridging the setting of the play (in 1981) and the post-Brexit referendum setting of the audiences that have watched it, from 2017 onwards – a time when the theme of nations being trapped by their histories was far from irrelevant. *The Ferryman* is not just a tragedy but a history play: moment by moment, the audience is so immersed in the action as to assume that the Carneys are doomed - but they must also know that the political contexts explored in the play later changed. The Hunger Strikes ended, and the IRA did manage to change its reputation sufficiently to become electable as Sinn Féin. Margaret Thatcher fell from power, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 brought peace, the IRA gave up its weapons, and the bodies of many (but not all) of the ‘Disappeared’ have been recovered. The cycles of violence that are dramatized in the play – and the inevitability of the tragedy that befalls the characters – have to be set against the audience’s certain (if perhaps not very detailed) knowledge that the cycle ended. That in turn could engender political awareness in at least some members of its audience, encouraging them to consider *how* the change came about, how the British state was (partly) responsible for that change, and what must be done to preserve the peace that has been achieved in Northern Ireland since 1998. It would be wrong to claim that it was Butterworth’s *intention* to respond to the debate about Northern Ireland that emerged after the Brexit referendum – but it is important to see that the production intervenes in those debates anyway.

For these and many other reasons, descriptions of *The Ferryman* as ‘part of the canon of Irish drama’ are not just mistaken; they represent a missed opportunity to consider the place of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, of Irish culture within the theatre of England, and of English theatre such as the Royal Court in the development of ‘Irish drama’ (whether as genre or a simple description of dramas that were written by people from the island of Ireland), and of *The Ferryman* within the canon of English drama. That omission might ultimately validate Butterworth’s decision to integrate elements of Irish drama into the English

dramatic tradition: he shows conclusively that English audiences and critics can and must know and understand the Irish dramatic tradition in general, and Northern Ireland in particular, much better.

If *The Ferryman* is indeed an ‘Irish play’ then it is not a very successful one: too many of its images and tropes are unoriginal; it is recirculating clichés rather than pushing the form forward – and although it claims to be rooted in documentary realism (despite its obviously supernatural elements), it gets many simple things wrong. But perhaps a fairer, more accurate, and more interesting approach is to see it as the work of a (fairly) well-informed, interested and sympathetic outsider: it comes from a sincere desire to engage with, interpret and pay homage to elements of Irish literature, and perhaps to consider the place of Irish literature within English culture – and certainly to display the importance of Irish literature to Butterworth himself. As such, it represents an important development of Jez Butterworth’s themes and preoccupations – and deserves to be understood and celebrated as such.

¹ As outlined later in this article, there are occasional references to Irish literature in Butterworth’s other plays, notably *The River*.

² The public interview with Helen Meany was held at An Grianan Theatre, Letterkenny, on 18 August 2018 as part of a Brian Friel festival. References to this event are taken from my own notes as an audience-member.

³ The history of the stage Irishman in English drama has been written about extensively; Declan Kiberd’s *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) is the fullest treatment of the topic. Debates about cultural appropriation have been a feature of the London stage for decades if not centuries, but have become increasingly common since Richard Bean’s *England People Very Nice* provoked controversy in 2009: shortly after the run of *Ferryman* concluded, there were also complaints about the casting of non-Jewish actors in *Falsettos* in 2018, followed by a controversy about the representation of trans characters in an adaptation of Patrick McCabe’s *Breakfast on Pluto* that had been scheduled for production at the Donmar Warehouse in 2020 (among other examples).

⁴ There is an extensive literature on this subject but some pertinent examples include RF Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch* (London: Penguin, 1995); Jennifer Mooney, *Irish Stereotypes in Vaudeville, 1865-1905* (London: Springer, 2015); and Kiberd’s *Inventing Ireland*.

⁵ Its New York run (also directed by Mendes and featuring many members of the original cast) was similarly well received when it opened in New York in October 2018; it too won multiple awards, including the Tony for Best Play, and ran for more than 300 performances. However, criticism from the Irish-American media was both severe and persistent. For one example, see Cahir O’Doherty, ‘Don’t Pay the Ferryman’, *Irish Central* 6 November 2018. <https://www.irishcentral.com/news/irishvoice/ferryman-broadway-review>

⁶ See Peter Harris, ‘Chronological Table of Irish Plays Produced in London 1920-2006’ in Ben Levitas and Richard Allen Cave, *Irish Theatre in England* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2007), pp. 195-286.

⁷ Donnelly’s uncle was Eugene Simons, who was abducted in 1981 (the year in which *The Ferryman* is set, and the year before Donnelly was born). He was murdered and buried in an unmarked grave in the Republic of Ireland. He is one of the ‘Disappeared’ referred to later in this article.

⁸ The definitive study of *Translations* and the Troubles remains Marilyn Richtig’s *Acting between the lines* (Washington DC: CUA Press, 2001).

⁹ For a well-informed summary of the topic see Tony Connelly, *Brexit and Ireland* (London: Penguin, 2017).

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- ¹⁰ The marketing of the play cannot be explored in depth here, but a Royal Court webpage offers a typical example of content and tone. The play is described only as being about a family gathering in 1981 that is interrupted by the arrival of an unexpected visitor – but there is no reference to the IRA, the Hunger Strikes, or the Troubles. See <https://royalcourttheatre.com/whats-on/the-ferryman-westend/> (accessed 23 March 2020). Butterworth was inspired to write his play after watching a documentary about the Disappeared in 2013. See Laura Collins-Hughes, 'The Ferryman Shows a Dark Irish Chapter Through a Personal Lens', *New York Times* 10 October 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/10/theater/the-ferryman-broadway.html>
- ¹¹ For the controversy about McDonagh's nationality, see Patrick Lonergan, *The Theatre and Films of Martin McDonagh* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 89-90
- ¹² The phrase 'part Irish Catholic' recurs in articles about Butterworth, and seems to originate from a 2014 profile by Emma Brockes, 'All or Nothing', *New Yorker*, 3 November 2014. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/11/10/nothing-2>
- ¹³ Quoted by Emine Saner, 'Jez Butterworth: playwright "without equal" turns his gaze on the Troubles', *Guardian*, 4 November, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/nov/04/jez-butterworth-playwright-without-equal-turns-his-gaze-on-the-troubles>
- ¹⁴ Anna Harpin, "Land of hope and glory: Jez Butterworth's tragic landscapes." *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 31.1 (2011): 61-73, p. 65.
- ¹⁵ Veronica Thorpe, 'Jez Butterworth: the visionary fast becoming a theatrical great', *Observer*, 7 May 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/may/06/jez-butterworth-visionary-fast-becoming-theatrical-great-ferryman-royal-court>
- ¹⁶ Ben Brantley, 'Review: "The Ferryman" in Jez Butterworth's Northern Ireland'. *New York Times*, 4 May 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/04/theater/review-the-ferryman-in-jez-butterworths-ireland.html>
- ¹⁷ Susannah Clapp, 'Review: *The Ferryman*'. *Observer*, 7 May 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/may/07/ferryman-royal-court-jez-butterworth-review-magic>
- Tom Kettle was played by John Hodgkinson.
- ¹⁸ Sean O'Hagan, 'Critics loved *The Ferryman*. But I'm from Northern Ireland, and it doesn't ring true', *The Guardian* 16 July 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jul/16/jez-butterworth-the-ferryman-irish-stereotypes-sam-mendes>
- ¹⁹ Linkiewicz set her play in Sligo because she 'wanted to use Irish voices to facilitate her lyrical language, aware that the same words in an English accent might sound "flowery"'. See Patrick Lonergan, *Theatre and Globalization* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), p. 93. For Richard Eyre's decision to cast Irish actors in *Liola* see Pirandello Society of America, 'Pirandello's "Sicilianness" in Translation'. <https://blogs.baruch.cuny.edu/pirandellosociety/2019/07/01/psa-xxx-pirandellos-sicilianness-in-translation/>, 1 July 2019. The apparent implication in both cases is that, 'flowery' accents aside, Ireland and England might otherwise be interchangeable.
- ²⁰ The Hare archive at the Harry Ransom Center houses several files relating to *England's Ireland*, including Hare's views on its 'censorship'. File number TXRC95-A129. Box 29, Folders 4-5; Box 32, Folder 4.
- ²¹ Jez Butterworth, *The Ferryman* (London, Nick Hern, 2017), p. 27. Subsequent references are included in parentheses.
- ²² A comprehensive account of the Disappeared features in Patrick Radden Keefe's *Say Nothing* (London: William Collins, 2019).
- ²³ Stephen O'Neill's account of the stage history of Macmorris is directly relevant. *Staging Ireland*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), pp. 146-76
- ²⁴ The best scholarly account of banshee folklore is Patricia Lysaght, *The Banshee* (Dublin: Glendale Press, 1986).
- ²⁵ William Butler Yeats, *Collected Works Volume II: The Plays* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 92.
- ²⁶ For a discussion of how this theme is developed in Irish drama, see Patrick Lonergan, *Irish Drama and Theatre Since 1950* (London: Methuen Drama, 2019), pp. 5-9
- ²⁷ It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the extent to which Butterworth is also drawing on themes from Greek drama, but it is important to note that Greek models have themselves been used to explore the Northern Irish Troubles, notably in the case of the many productions of *Antigone* that, like *The Ferryman*, explore the fate of the Disappeared. For a broader discussion, see Marianne McDonald, *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy* (London: Methuen Drama, 2002).
- ²⁸ David Ian Rabey, *The Theatre and Films of Jez Butterworth* (London: Methuen, 2015), p. 21
- ²⁹ Lonergan, *Irish Theatre and Drama Since 1950* pp. 147-69. Also Tom Maguire, *Making theatre in Northern Ireland: through and beyond the Troubles* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006).
- ³⁰ *Inventing Ireland* p. 1.
- ³¹ Rabey, pp. 14-16
- ³² As noted in PW Joyce in *English as We Speak it in Ireland* (Dublin: Longmans, 1910), p. 42.

³³ Arguments about the historical inaccuracy of *Translations* have continued since its 1980 premiere; Chris Morash provides a helpful summary in *A History of Irish Theatre: 1601-2000*. (Cambridge University Press, 2002). pp. 233–241. Also see Richtarik for a detailed examination.

³⁴ At the August 2018 event at An Grianan, Butterworth explained that he was inspired to begin writing plays when he chanced upon an amateur production of *Translations* in the mid-1980s.

³⁵ Jez Butterworth, *Jerusalem*. (London: Nick Hern, 2009), pp. 108-9.

³⁶ The date is not given in the play but the Hunger Striker Michael Devine died on 20 August, 1981.

³⁷ *Jerusalem*, p. 47

³⁸ See Aoife McGrath, *Dance Theatre in Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 6-8; and Aoife Monks, *Comely Maidens and Celtic Tigers* (London: Goldsmiths, 2007).

³⁹ I am referring to the unfinished joke about an Englishman in a brothel in Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber, 2010), pp. 12-13.

⁴⁰ Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber, 1972).

⁴¹ Jez Butterworth, *The River* (London: Nick Hern, 2012), p. 7 and p. 44

⁴² W.B Yeats, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (London: Walter Scott, 1888), pp. 129-30

⁴³ *The Ferryman*, p. 36.

⁴⁴ See Katy Shaw. "Phantasmal Intertexts: Literary Spectrality in Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (2009)." *Hauntology*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018. 43-58 and Graham Saunders, *Elizabethan and Jacobean Reappropriation in Contemporary British Drama*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2017. 151-175.

⁴⁵ *The River*, pp. 14-15, p. 44.